

# An exchange of letters on the New York City transit workers' contract struggle

12 February 2000

*We are posting below an exchange of letters concerning the February 2 WSWS Editorial Board statement "Political lessons of the New York transit workers' contract struggle."*

To whom it may concern,

I would like to say that I found the February 2 article on the Metropolitan Transit Authority strike in New York interesting, well written, and convincing in most of its arguments. I would like to add one thing, however, concerning the specifics of the strike's significance to the class struggle in New York and in the country as a whole. The article should be commended for recognizing and addressing the "intensification of the class struggle" in recent years, which, as it points out, has been extremely "one sided." But more can and should be made clear about the specifics of this development, as it relates to the MTA strike.

The primary policy pursued by the Giuliani administration, which unambiguously represents the currently triumphant bourgeoisie and capitalist interests in New York City, has been to win wholesale tax cuts for the large corporations which dominate the city's economy. To compensate for the massive amount of government revenue being lost by these measures, the administration has simultaneously undertaken to systematically cut all forms of public spending. The significance of the strike is that now the attack on government spending, which primarily benefits the city's working class, has emerged victorious and can go on reversing all of the gains made since the New Deal concerning social welfare and public services, and continue to liberalize the economy.

The union leadership surrendered all of its own power to defend against this, and presumably also that of all other government employees, as has been noted, in an extremely shameful and dishonorable fashion. To

return to how these developments should be viewed in the context of the class struggle as a whole, I do not agree with the article's contention that Giuliani could not tolerate a strike for fear of growing radicalism among the working class as a whole. His main motive in destroying the prospective strike and with it the union, was, I believe, to consolidate his economic policy of cutting public spending, on which his broader economic liberalization is contingent. To do this he divided the working class against itself, by telling them that a strike would necessitate a raise in fare rates. This was a bald-faced lie, because his own policies have done far more to imperil the city's fiscal budget than any 15, or for that matter 20 or 25 percent raise for transit workers could have.

AR

Queens, New York

3 February 2000

Thank you very much for your appreciative letter on our statement regarding the transit contract struggle in New York. However, it is important to discuss the one disagreement that you have regarding the relationship of Mayor Giuliani's economic policies and the threat of a strike.

You write, "I do not agree with the article's contention that Giuliani could not tolerate a strike for fear of growing radicalism among the working class as a whole. His main motive in destroying the perspective strike and with it the union, was, I believe, to consolidate his economic policy of cutting public spending ..."

In these two sentences, you have separated the mayor's economic policies from the struggle of the working class. We have explained both in the statement, and elsewhere, that the current Wall Street boom and windfall for the rich, depends, most fundamentally, on the economic and political

suppression of the working class. The mayor is only one of the representatives of the ruling powers who recognizes that the unprecedented growth of share values on the stock market can only be maintained if the living standards of workers are either held in check or lowered. Giuliani's budget cuts against working people and the poor are driven by this reality.

You express skepticism about the ability of the working class to fight these policies. But the class struggle is an objective process. The further growth of social and economic inequality will inevitably increase the militancy and resistance of the working class. The mayor and the rest of the city's political and economic establishment are well aware of this, and that is why they intervened so ruthlessly to prevent a walkout by transit workers.

The mayor feared not only a transit strike, but also the support that such a walkout would have gotten from the rest of the city's working masses. As a matter of fact, it was the growing determination of the transit workers to fight back that generated such fear in the city's ruling circles.

You correctly write that Giuliani attempted to demonize transit workers for being responsible for a huge fare hike if they got a good contract. However, politicians and the media have previously employed this tactic. What was different this time was the extent to which this propaganda fell on deaf ears among the city's working and middle classes. That is because, like the transit workers, the vast majority of the city's working people have experienced stagnating living standards under conditions in which they are told the economy has never been so good.

Here we get into the major political lesson of the contract struggle. You state that Giuliani wanted to destroy the Transport Workers Union (TWU), as well as a strike movement. However, it is not the union, as you state, that the mayor sought to destroy. Quite the contrary, it is clear that the TWU leadership collaborated with Giuliani in obtaining a court order that would help them restrain a movement of the rank and file that was getting out of their control. This, as we have explained, has become the role of these pro-capitalist trade unions today.

What is holding workers back is certainly not their lack of will to fight or militancy, which was clearly exhibited during these events, but the lack of a

perspective and political party to organize a fight against the capitalist system as whole. It is only the struggle for socialist policies and the political independence of workers from the big business parties that can unite the masses to defeat budget cuts, and the attacks on their living standards and democratic rights.

Alan Whyte, for the WSWs Editorial Board

10 February 2000



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